The Making of a Man
John 21:1-17
April 5, 1970
John M. Buchanan
Bethany Presbyterian Church

Have you ever walked along the sea shore in the very early morning? The breakers seem quieter then: the air is fresh and still very cool: the chill of the breeze does battle on your back with the faint sun and you shiver occasionally. The beach is littered with the early tide's delivery of shells, clams, mussels: the only irregular sound is the occasional squawk of a gull. It's misty and salty and very good for reflecting on one's smallness and for putting one's concerns back into perspective.

It was a morning like that on the sea of Galilea, also called the Sea of Tiberius. Seven men were in a boat fishing about 100 yards off the beach, completely silent, barely visible in the light of dawn. It was no an uncommon sight: fishermen often spent the night in their small boats. But there was something special about this party. These were seven disciples of Jesus. They had returned from Jerusalem to their familiar sea. It must have seemed like months to them, but it was only a few weeks prior that they had followed Jesus from Galilea to the city. They had witnessed his steady pilgrimage to the cross. They were with him as he cleansed the Temple, when he confronted the angry Priests and Scribes. They were with him in an upper room for the Last Supper: they watched him betrayed and arrested. No doubt they were somewhere in that mob which stood below Pilate's portico and screamed for his crucifixion. They had seen that, too. They had stayed together in the valley of the shadow of death, and together, on the first day of the week, they had shared the experience of his Risen Presence. These were no ordinary fishermen. But they had returned to Galilea, thinking, talking, waiting.

I like to imagine that it was Peter who suggested that they go fishing for a while. The return to the boat, the ropes, the nets and the hard work would be therapy for troubled minds.

So they were 100 yards offshore in the dawn, with empty nets, and a voice from the beach broke the silence. "Have you caught anything?" When they signalled that their nets were empty the man, whom they had not noticed, advised them to try the other side of the boat. Again, it was not an uncommon procedure. Shoals of fish are visible from the shore in the early light of dawn, and fishing parties often left one of their number there to be a "spotter".

They did as he advised, and it was then that John - the first to believe - recognized him. "It is the Lord." Peter, always impetuous, always the first to act, pulled on his short coat, jumped out of the boat, half swimming, running, stumbling through the water. Was John right? Was it Jesus? Perhaps someone else: - or just a delusion. He would see first: nothing else mattered. And the others pulled in the net and dragged it slowly to the beach.

He had already started a fire: a few fish were cooking and he had a loaf of bread. He invited them to add some of the fish they had caught and to join him for breakfast. So they broke bread together again, and the memory of that last supper and the events it prefaced must have burned in their hearts. None of them dared speak; each had his own private thoughts: each shared a particular guilt. The last time they were together like this they had deserted him. So the first word would be his. Their apologies - confessions - excuses - could not be said.

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" It was Peter he addressed: through Peter he had come to conclude some unfinished business. To fully understand his question we must go back again and take another look at the man.

Peter was the unofficial leader, the spokesman. He was the activist, the rugged fisherman who was far better at feeling something than thinking it through. He was the one to speak first - thus the one who first caught a glimmer of the truth that Jesus was the Christ; but also the first to misunderstand what that meant. Peter was a big man with a big heart and deep feelings. At the last supper it was Peter who protested vehemently that he would never deny Jesus. It was Peter who protested about Jesus washing their feet. In the garden it was Peter who drew his sword and would gladly have fought it out with the guards. He would have died for Jesus and with Jesus at that moment.

When the rest slipped into the shadows of Gethsemane, fleeing in terror, it was Peter alone who followed, knowing the foolishness, the risks, yet unable to do otherwise. And so it was Peter who was identified in the courtyard outside the building where they were questioning Jesus. "You are one of them!" He wasn't prepared for this. To fight and die - yes. But the sudden accusation caught him off guard. Typically his response was immediate, reflexive: he denied it. Three times during that long and agonizing night the accusation came. Three times Peter denied ever knowing Jesus, the last time punctuating it with an obscenity. When the soldiers brought Jesus out of the house their eyes must have met briefly: he recalled Jesus' statement that he would do exactly what he had just done. And the agony in this big man's heart was more than we can possibly imagine.

Of all the disciples portrayed in the New Testament Peter is the most understandable. This man is for real. He acted like people we know. He did things the way many of us would have done them. In one moment he passionately believed: in the next moment he could be thoughtless and unfaithful. He was impetuous, with his heart on his sleeve. In Jesus Christ he had found something big enough to give his life to, but time and time again he was filled with self-doubt. He was not good enough. He had failed. In a crisis he had acted selfishly, saving his own skin. I can see Peter stumbling through the surf with tears streaming down his cheeks: the tears of guilt and joy which only big men are free to shed. I can see Peter standing before his Lord, staring dumbly at the shells and sand and fire and bread.

"Do you love me more than these? Do you love me, Peter, more than these others do? - Do you love me more than you love them? Do you love me more than you love the fish and the fresh salt air, and the good feeling of tired muscles and friends and breakfast on the beach?" We don't know what the "these" indicates. We can stand with Peter, though, and sense that there is no need to say much. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Peter had denied Jesus three times. So the questions came three times. Nothing so disgusted this big, straightforward man as the shallow hypocrisy of the Pharisees strutting arrogantly in the Temple. Nothing was so offensive as the verbal orthodoxy of the Scribe who said one thing and lived another. And now he was no different. He offered no explanations: he entered the plea of guilty: "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."

The dialogue ends there, and I would suggest to you that it constituted the making of a man. For Peter was not judged or criticized or condemned for what he had done and been. Peter's failure - and it was clearly a failure - was nevertheless the failure of a brave man. He had lied and been selfish - but he alone had put himself in a situation where he could fail. He alone had followed that far - he alone love that much.

Peter became a man, I would suggest, when Jesus led him to accept himself. His becoming a man was resolved on that beach when he learned that difficult lesson that he was capable of failure and dishonesty and cowardice: when he learned to accept that about himself.

From the psychological disciplines we have learned that a major emotional problem with a lot of people is a lack of self-esteem. We have ideals and goals and morals by which we live and in the light of which we see ourselves. And we never make the grade. We keep stumbling and falling, denying our ideal, impetuously doing

what our model dictates against. And as the tension between model and self increases, self-esteem lowers until we literally can't stand ourselves.

The psychologists tell us that the man who can't stand himself can't very well love anyone else; in fact he can't live very effectively. He will pursue self-esteem in any number of ways - but it will be forever illusive. He will look to others for his own worth, and where the others fail he will assume that the greater fault is his own.

The Good News of the Gospel, however, is that an indiviual's worth, his self-esteem depends on nothing but the Grace of God. For the Christian, self acceptance is based on nothing but the loving acceptance of Jesus Christ. He could accept Peter - in spite of the denials. He accepts me and you anin spite of thousand failures each day brings.

Peter became a man when he learned that. He heard the Gospel on that misty beach, perhaps for the first time, as he felt the grace of Jesus Christ accept him, support him - when he had nothing to offer but his stumbling, errant life. Peter became an effective person, a great and courageous Saint, truly and fully a man.

There is a second motif in all of this, not unrelated to the first, which merits our attention. Peter professed his love for Jesus three times. And after each profession Jesus said: "Feed my lambs - tend my sheep - feed my sheep." That is to say, "Your failures do not condemn you, Peter. But if you profess to love me, the way to live that love is in service to others. The test of your love for me is not so much in your unswerving loyalty, certainly not in verbal affirmations of faith. It is solely in the service it causes you to render other men.

We know the truth of that in our own interpersonal relations, particularly our parenthood and marriages. We know that we can save our breath if our behavior toward our children does not express something of what we are trying to tell them. A new generation of young people has called our hand when we pontificate about the evils of drugs - while depending on gentle blue pills to calm our nerves, and little white pills to bring sleep, and pink capsules to get us going in the morning: and in between depending on nicotine, cafeine, codeine and alcohol to see us through. We're learning a hard lesson here - and we learn it intimately with our wives and husbands. Verbal affirmation are meaningless. Protestations of undying love count for nothing until they get expressed in kindness, forgiveness and thoughtfulness.

We're beginning to see the truth of that relative to the church. No where in all of society are more noble affirmations articulated than in the sanctuary of a church on Sunday morning. And they mean absolutely nothing - until some sheep start getting fed.

Someone has recently said that the typical Protestant Church today is like a big department store that lets all the clerks in at 9:30 and then locks the doors. All the workers spend the day selling items to each other, teaching each other how to be better clerks, vacuuming the carpets and keeping the shelves neat. Then at 5:00 the doors are opened and they all go home.

It bothers me, and if you love your church, it ought to bother you, that there aren't really very many sheep getting fed. There really aren't too many people concretely helped by our presence here on Sunday morning. Of course a portion of that money we give will go to the helping ministry of the Church and that is good. But individuals - in Lafayette - this neighborhood - these are our concern. That is the mission of this Church. To serve and love - to make a difference in the lives of people in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter became a man when he could accept himself, and when he saw that greatest truth the Gospel has contributed to the life of humanity - that real life is living for others; that all the meaning and satisfaction and joy a man needs derives from living in effective service of his fellowmen.

Peter became a man - and so may we.

Amen.

Forgive us, our Father for our daily denial. Help us to accept the failures in ourselves and to live in the freedom of your love. Make us sensitive to the needs of others, so that our creeds become deeds of love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.